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Cultural Studies and Cultural Text Analysis

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**Urpo Kovala,
"Cultural Studies and Cultural Text Analysis"**
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Contents of CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture 4.4 (2002)
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Edited by Urpo Kovala

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Abstract: In his article, "Cultural Studies and Cultural Text Analysis," Urpo Kovala discusses the role of textual analysis in cultural studies. He begins with a sketch of different conceptions of textual analysis within cultural studies by pointing to differences in the concepts of text and context themselves. Next, Kovala explores the reasons for including textual analysis as a category and method in cultural studies and in humanities and social sciences scholarship generally. Finally, Kovala sketches briefly a model for the cultural analysis of text where his main point is that the argument about the incompatibility of cultural studies and textual analysis is untenable today. Instead, what is needed now is a heterological, multi-level, and perspectival notion of both text and context.

Urpo KOVALA

Cultural Studies and Cultural Textual Analysis

Cultural studies is often taken to mean a research orientation emphasising contexts and opposing text-centred analysis, or even textual analysis per se. And indeed, early cultural studies emerged as a reaction against immanent and elitist notions of culture and meaning which were prevalent especially in literary studies. But on the other hand, this reaction did not lead to abandoning textual analysis itself. This links with the fact that the very foundations of cultural studies lie in the intersection of literary and sociological theory. The project of cultural studies, as it arose in England, was to understand what it felt like to be alive at a particular time and place through the interpretation of cultural -- artistic and communicative -- texts (see Grossberg *Bringing*, 146). Indeed, British cultural studies depended in its early stage heavily on close analysis of traditional sorts of texts (Nelson 211). It seems therefore logical that the first collective research project of the Birmingham Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies centred on textual analysis, as I suggest in my "Introduction to *Cultural Text Analysis and Leksom's Short Story 'We Got Married'*" <<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol4/iss4/1/>> to this issue of *CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture*. The project, which focussed on a short story, "Cure for Marriage" by Nancy Burrage Owen, and that had appeared in a women's magazine, nevertheless had a clear contextualising emphasis (see Grossberg 24-25). Later, textual analysis within the cultural studies framework evolved towards an emphasis on reception studies increasingly. At first this happened in terms of the structuralist model according to which texts contain several meanings, of which some are presented as foregrounded, "preferred," while the reader may decode the text against the grain. Later still, reception all but stole the show so that reception or audience studies became perhaps the central and certainly a prominent and visible part of cultural studies. In this process, reception in turn came to be seen in a wide sense, including what in the literary paradigm would have appeared as irrelevant to meaning, notably different everyday contexts of use.

Along with and as a consequence of this development, the traditional view of seeing reading as the passive adoption of the meaning of one single text became suspect. A good instance of this development is Janice A. Radway's pioneering book *Reading the Romance*. In that book, Radway studied the everyday contexts of reading but also looked at aspects of production -- the intentions of the writers, for instance -- and at the texts read. Hers is actually an instance of the kind of "integrated approach" to cultural meaning that Janet Wolff has called for. But later, Radway herself and others (see, e.g., Brunt 79; Radway *Reading*, 364) thought she had not gone far enough towards ethnography, but had -- besides replicating the survey type of research -- also retained the text as the privileged focus and thus limited her own access to cultural meanings. The shift of emphasis from textual analysis towards accounting for the significances of contexts of use can roughly be placed in the 1980s. It is symptomatic of this development that the editors of the volume *Cultural Studies* could write in their introduction to the book: "although there is no prohibition against close textual readings in cultural studies, they are also not required" (Nelson, Treichler, and Grossberg 2). Besides, they added, textual analysis in literary studies is burdened with assumptions of self-determination and autonomy as well as of canonicity which do not fit happily together with a cultural studies orientation. Thus, textual analysis was just another approach, which however had ideological underpinnings to fight against.

Owing to the emphasis on reception and the suspicions concerning Trojan horses, cultural studies has become vulnerable to accusations of over-contextualisation. But on the other hand, cultural studies have also been criticised of over-textualisation, of turning its subject matter into text deprived of any or most of its contextual determinants. If reception has featured prominently in the practices of cultural studies, the production aspect especially has mostly been ignored, according to the critics. On this view, cultural activities became texts to be read, rather than institutions or acts to be analysed. One exception to this trend was the focus on audiences and, thereby, on empirical work (see, e.g., Ferguson and Golding xxi; for a bibliographies of empirical work in literary and audience studies, see Tötösy <<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweblibrary/audiencestudies>>). There have been some signs within cultural studies themselves, due to the "growing unease with

the textualist and postmodernist trends that facilitated the moving away of cultural analysis from its substantive political, social and material roots," to rediscover sociological methods and more generally to rethink the tasks and methods of cultural studies (Ferguson and Golding xvii-xviii).

The charge of textualism acquired a wider currency as a wholesale concern about the apparent idealist epistemology of much cultural studies analysis. In the early 1990s, eventually, Stuart Hall noted it was time to return the project of cultural studies from the "clean air of meaning and textuality and theory to the something nasty down below" (264). For Hall, textualisation meant constituting power and politics essentially as matters of language or discourse and his conclusion was that "textuality is never enough" (271). Here we see the dichotomy text/context being constantly reiterated in different articulations. But what is at issue is not the relationship of text and context but "something else." Joly Jensen and John J. Pauly aptly summarise the consequences of textualisation: "Embedded in the term *text* are all our long-contested practices of literacy, education, governance, worship, science, and art. In fact much of the problems which are being dubbed textualism are due to the fact that the very term 'text' incorporates and therefore reiterates long-contested assumptions and practices concerning literacy, education, governance, worship, science, and art" (157). This leads us to the question what is actually meant by the term "text" in critiques and defences of cultural studies? At times it seems to mean "research object as severed off of its (essential) contextual connections," at others it is "research object taken as ordered signifying surface," and at others still, it means "Text" -- that is, text as seen from a particular frame of reference attaching to it ideological notions of meaning. Much of the confusion around the textuality or contextuality of cultural studies actually seems to be due to the shifting meanings of both text and context. Yet another critique against cultural studies has been apparently (but only apparently) the opposite one. Namely, on this view, cultural studies focuses on contextualisation to the extent that it neglects the specific properties of texts and genres. This critique has, understandably, been strongest within literary studies, where text and interpretation have traditionally held the central role within the practices of the discipline. In short, cultural studies is then seen as a fundamentally reductionist enterprise which privileges some context or contexts over text and textual analysis.

However, we should keep in mind that there are different positions or "formations" (Grossberg) within cultural studies as well concerning the role of text and textual analysis. First, text analysis does appear in much of cultural studies work as one point of reference among others. Apart from this, there are particular stances laying exceptional emphasis on context. The theory of articulation, which goes back to Gramsci and Laclau and Mouffe, and which has been elaborated within cultural studies by Hall and Grossberg especially, is a theory laying exceptional stress on what could be called horizontal, contextual, relations of meaning as opposed to vertical, semantic, relations. At the same time, the theory foregrounds the need to pay close attention to the unique, case-specific, articulations of the phenomenon to be studied. But this -- actually poststructuralist -- stress on contextual networks is also a matter of debate within cultural studies. Johan Fornäs, for instance, represents a more hermeneutic approach to popular culture, emphasising textuality and mediation. His view is that cultural studies cannot escape interpreting textual meanings. For him, "the life of texts" takes place on four interconnected levels: materiality, form-relations, meaning and application. It is the task of cultural studies to try and take into account all these levels, including that of meaning (Fornäs 57). On the other hand, Grossberg has criticised such approaches which are built on the concepts of mediation, communication, and social constructionism ("Cultural Studies" 75). The problem with these trends for him is that they reduce all sense-making to questions of meaning and interpretation. Instead of what texts mean or even what people do with texts, according to Grossberg, cultural studies "should be concerned with what discursive practices do in the world" ("Cultural Studies" 75). Instead of a "new hermeneutics" we find here a political-semiotic frame of reference informed by poststructuralism, notably the "rhizomatics" of Deleuze and Guattari.

Another attack on meaning and interpretation -- partially convergent with Grossberg's -- is that launched by Joke Hermes within audience studies. In her book on the reading of women's magazines, Hermes claims that most of audience studies have been plagued with what she calls a "fallacy of meaningfulness" (12-15) and she argues that such studies do not address everyday sense-

making because they focus too much on specific texts. She rejects text analysis altogether because that would, she argues, always imply that readers miss something when reading, e.g., the deeper meanings of texts. Hermes writes: "Text analysis assumes that texts offer a limited range of meanings that cannot but be taken up by readers. My perspective is that texts acquire meaning only in the interaction between readers and texts and that analysis of the text on its own is never enough to reconstruct these meanings" (10). We have here two different claims. The latter appears rather common-sensical today and boils down to a statement of the necessarily interactive and contextual nature of reading. Analysis of the text "on its own" is obviously not enough. But then, the definition of textual analysis in the former sentence is highly questionable. Is it not possible to conceive of a kind of text analysis covering interaction and contexts? We shall return to this issue below. Although Grossberg and Hermes seem to be making the same point against textual analysis, their critiques rest on different notions of context and text. For Grossberg, the boundary of text and context all but vanishes, leaving us with something of a network of texts and contexts, a rhizomatic entity. With Hermes, in turn, we seem to be facing a more traditional view of context, with the exception that she is laying heavy, almost exclusive, emphasis on everyday contexts of use. In this she is going much further than Janice Radway, who, as we noted above, still retained text as an important point of reference.

Why Text?

In the late 1980s and from the early 1990s on especially, there have been voices within cultural studies themselves which have pointed out the use and necessity of textual analysis. This links to the rise of audience and television studies referred to above (for audience studies see also Tötösy 2000 <<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweblibrary/audiencestudies>>). Unlike film theory, in which the text has typically tended to be privileged over context, television studies have tended to privilege the context over the text (Gray 45). In 1989, television and audience studies had become so popular that Charlotte Brunsdon felt it necessary to appeal for the retention of "the notion of text as an analytical category" (120). Another aspect of this self-critique is that cultural studies have been felt to downplay or bypass altogether the specificities of the medium and genre they're analysing. Approaching the question from the point of view of literature, Ian Hunter and Marianne DeKoven have expressed their concern that the category of "the literary" has, in cultural studies, become opposed to the popular and virtually identified with the high-cultural, exclusionary standards of literary merit derived by New Criticism from literary modernism (DeKoven 129-30). On the one hand this has meant that literature has increasingly become to be seen as a complex cultural formation with its ideological underpinnings. But on the other hand, the literary has remained equated with the dehistoricised and decontextualised object of textualist theories. Ian Hunter, in turn, has shown how the aesthetic, and the literary in particular, has emerged in modern Western culture as a "practice of the self." For him, the literary has an interrogative function covering both reading and writing, functioning as a "device -- an object for a practice of contemplation targeted on the self" (363-65).

Norman Fairclough, British linguist and one of the central figures of critical discourse analysis, lists four reasons why textual analysis is both useful and to some extent even necessary in studies of social context. The *theoretical* reason is that the social structures which are the focus of attention of many social scientists, and texts, in turn, constitute one very important form of social action. Further, as language is widely misinterpreted as transparent, the precise mechanisms and modalities of the social and ideological work that language does in producing, reproducing or transforming social structures, relations and identities, is routinely overlooked. (Fairclough 208-09.) The *methodological* reason is that texts constitute a major source of *evidence* for grounding claims about social structures, relations and processes. As for instance John B. Thompson has emphasised, for instance the analysis of ideology should be referable to the detailed properties of text (Fairclough 209). The *historical* reason for the importance of textual analysis is that texts are sensitive barometers of social processes, movement and diversity, and textual analysis can provide particularly good indicators of social change. It can therefore act as a counter-balance to overly rigid and schematising social analyses, and is a valuable method in studies of social and cultural change (Fairclough 209). Finally, the *political* reason relates to social science with critical objec-

tives especially -- and here we find a connection to our discussion on cultural studies. Namely, it is increasingly through texts (visual texts included) that social control and social domination are exercised. Textual analysis can therefore be a political resource as well (Fairclough 2009). This way of legitimising textual analysis, it must be added, still implies, to some extent at least, that texts and contexts are separate. Fairclough is looking at textual analysis as a tool for studying macro-level phenomena. We still need to supplement this treatment with the view of text as thoroughly contextual per se and of text and context as intertwined. This leads us to the need to look at the text-context complex from both ends and from various perspectives. Here Fairclough's three-level notion of discourse is useful. That is, he suggests that textual analysis move between all levels of discourse -- those of text, discursive practice, and social practice.

In a similar vein, Rosalind Brunt has argued for the inclusion of textual analysis in teaching cultural studies, on the grounds that it is a valid and productive area of study, and that e.g. the detection and struggle against oppressive strategies necessitates understanding the textual mechanisms of those strategies. Writes Brunt: "and I constantly say, 'yes it does oppress women but we need to know specifically in the text the ways in which it oppresses women'" (79-80). Both Fairclough and Brunt are saying in fact that it is not enough -- and certainly not if done exclusively -- to study cultural and social structures in the abstract. Instead, understanding them requires looking at them in actual contexts and through their "real-life" manifestations. One could translate this idea into the suggestion to look not only at both text and context, or at traces of context in text, but also at the concrete way in which the two are intertwined. This, of course, is perfectly in line with the contextualist emphasis on the "case at hand," on the concrete nexus of text and contexts.

The Cultural Analysis of Texts

In one sense, textual analysis is always contextual and thus cultural. "We are never not in a situation" (Fish 284) and cannot but bring in personal and shared contexts to bear in reading and interpretation. But then again, it does make sense to talk of textual analysis as a practice and at the same time to question the long-established practices and ideologies embedded in the notions of text and text analysis. The first characteristic of cultural analysis of texts, obviously, is that textual analysis be contextual. But "context" is so encompassive that to say that an approach is contextual does not mean much. Or rather, the determination of relevant context is itself a contextual matter. More precisely, one could say that post-cs textual analysis pays heed to social contexts, notably social and cultural differences and relations of power. As Grossberg puts it: "cultural studies is ... a context-specific theory/analysis of how contexts are made, unmade and remade as structures of power and domination" ("Cultural studies" 68). Secondly, post-cultural studies textual analysis acknowledges the existence of multiple frames of interpretation within culture and the need to avoid reducing texts to any one of these. Here Pierre Bourdieu's studies on the different aesthetics, drawn on by several of the papers in this issue of *CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture*, are of particular relevance. Thirdly, all aspects and levels of the communication situation should be taken into account. Reception is crucial here, making meaning cultural, but also the study of the production aspect should still be part of the cultural studies agenda. Or, as Fornäs puts it, texts "live" on the levels of materiality, form-relations, meaning and application, and all these should be accounted for in cultural studies work. And fourthly, a sort of perspectivism is needed. To avoid the critique of textualism, of severing the political and ideological dimensions of the phenomena studied, one needs to approach it from multiple perspectives and to deploy a wide range of methods. Douglas Kellner has frequently suggested for cultural studies to develop a "multiperspectival approach" which includes investigation of a wide range of artefacts interrogating relationships within the three dimensions of 1) the production and political economy of culture; 2) textual analysis and critique of its artefacts; and 3) study of audience reception and the uses of media/cultural products. He further proposes that textual analysis and audience reception studies utilise a multiplicity of perspectives and critical methods, when engaging in textual and analysis, and in delineating the multiplicity of subject positions, or perspectives, through which audiences appropriate culture (see Kellner <www.uta.edu/huma/illuminations/kell16.htm>).

This agenda is in effect in line with the view that texts, contexts and meanings are all complex, multi-layered and perspective-dependent phenomena. The more perspectives are utilised and

available, the better chances there are of producing insightful critical readings of texts and avoiding one-sided and reductive readings (Kellner 111). Note that both textualist and contextualist readings can be reductive, even though the label is, in literary studies especially, usually attached to the former. If we take seriously the claim that analysis of all kinds of texts is not only acceptable but also necessary in cultural studies, the question remains, what would this mean in practice? What does analysis of texts involve in a post cultural studies situation? One solution, referred to in passing above, would be an integrated approach which attempts to cover all the levels and aspects of the texts in question. Analysis of a text would then need to account for all aspects and levels of text -- production, text, and reception -- and also to try out different perspectives on it. Since these aspects are not independent in the real world, a division of labour e.g. according to disciplinary lines distorts the research object. On this basis Janet Wolff, for one, has recommended working towards a unified theory and methodology, which would incorporate all aspects of the literary text: "I think what we can insist on is an analysis which can incorporate all three moments of the literary, at the same time remaining sensitive to their inter-relations. What we must work towards is an adequately social-historical approach to literature, which is not reductionist, but which is informed by a sensitivity to representation and textuality" (Wolff 15-16).

But how feasible would such a model for textual analysis be? Wolff herself admits that an integrated analysis is actually impossible to achieve. But much the same idea of multi-level, perspectival analysis can be put in other terms as well. Mikko Lehtonen has sketched a model of text analysis informed by the developments within cultural studies concerning meaning and interpretation (see 155-58). His starting point is that any cultural analysis needs to move on all of the three levels he posits: those of texts, contexts and readers. This also entails the use of different methodologies: those of the poetics of texts, the hermeneutics of contexts, as well as ethnography of meanings. For Lehtonen, the cultural study of texts equals the study of the *articulations* of phenomena on these levels. Such an approach takes heed of both the singularity and the generality of the textual phenomena studied. Thus, Lehtonen's model recommends a kind of perspectivism and heterology in approaching texts, but does not require doing everything in the case of one single text and in one single study (see Lehtonen 3). Thus, the kinds and extent of contextualisation needed in textual analysis cannot be decided on in advance, they depend on context!

Is the Controversy Over?

Although I have discussed the significance of textual analysis above with reference to cultural studies only, the problematic is naturally broader. There have been and are many other approaches which are fundamentally contextualist by nature, many of which have often been blamed for reductionism -- e.g., sociological, Marxist, and feminist approaches, new historicism, frameworks in comparative literature, etc. However, it is in connection with cultural studies that the question of contextualism has become an issue of its own. And it is probably at least partly owing to the influence developments in cultural studies that the very notion of textual analysis seems to be undergoing profound changes in other fields as well. In a recent article on "immanent criticism" Gérard Genette (2001) deals with the relations of immanent or text-centred and contextual criticism. Interestingly, he ends his article suggesting that the idea of "transcendence" -- that is, contextuality of meaning -- has become so familiar that it does not arouse fierce debates any more: "la guerre est finie, peut-être." What used to appear as an oxymoron has become more and more of an accepted "articulation," as a radical contextualist would put it. But, one might add, if the war is over, battles go on. Academic practices have their own continuities, and those do not depend on theoretical tenets only. It is therefore that the notions of text and textual analysis tend to be conceived of in a non-contextual, dichotomical manner.

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